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#Protests and @realDonaldTrump: Public Perception of COVID-19 Lockdown Protests on Twitter

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#Protests and @realDonaldTrump

Molly Kavanaugh

IPHS 200 - Programming Humanity

Introduction

In late April, after weeks and weeks of quarantine due to the Covid-19 pandemic, groups of Americans across the country defied social distancing guidelines to protest lockdown orders, oppose governmental restrictions, and urge a return to normalcy. Those protesting wished for an immediate end to stay at home orders, business and school closures, and travel restrictions, in spite of leading health officials' stance that the continuation of social distancing and a gradual reopening of the country would minimize additional infections and help contain the spread of the virus. Some protesters declared that stay at home orders violated their constitutional rights; others expressed their need to return to work. On the extreme end of the spectrum, some protesters claimed the virus was a hoax or denied its severity. Many participants in the protests wore MAGA hats and waved "Trump 2020" flags, leading me to wonder about the public's perception concerning President Trump's connection to these protests. I wanted to know if Americans (regardless of their opposition to or support of the protests) link Trump's comments about Covid-19 and his position toward the protests to the prevalence of these protests. Given the fact that 2020 is an election year, public perception surrounding Covid-19 in general is especially important, as Trump seeks to remain in office, and this pandemic has proved to be the most serious challenge of his presidency.



Methodology

First, I want to clarify that this study makes no claim about a cause-and-effect relationship between Donald Trump's comments and the rise of American lockdown protests. There are countless factors influencing these protests, and reducing the situation to a cause-and-effect relationship would be far too simplistic and ultimately misleading. Instead, the goal of this study is to investigate public perception about the link between Trump and the protests.

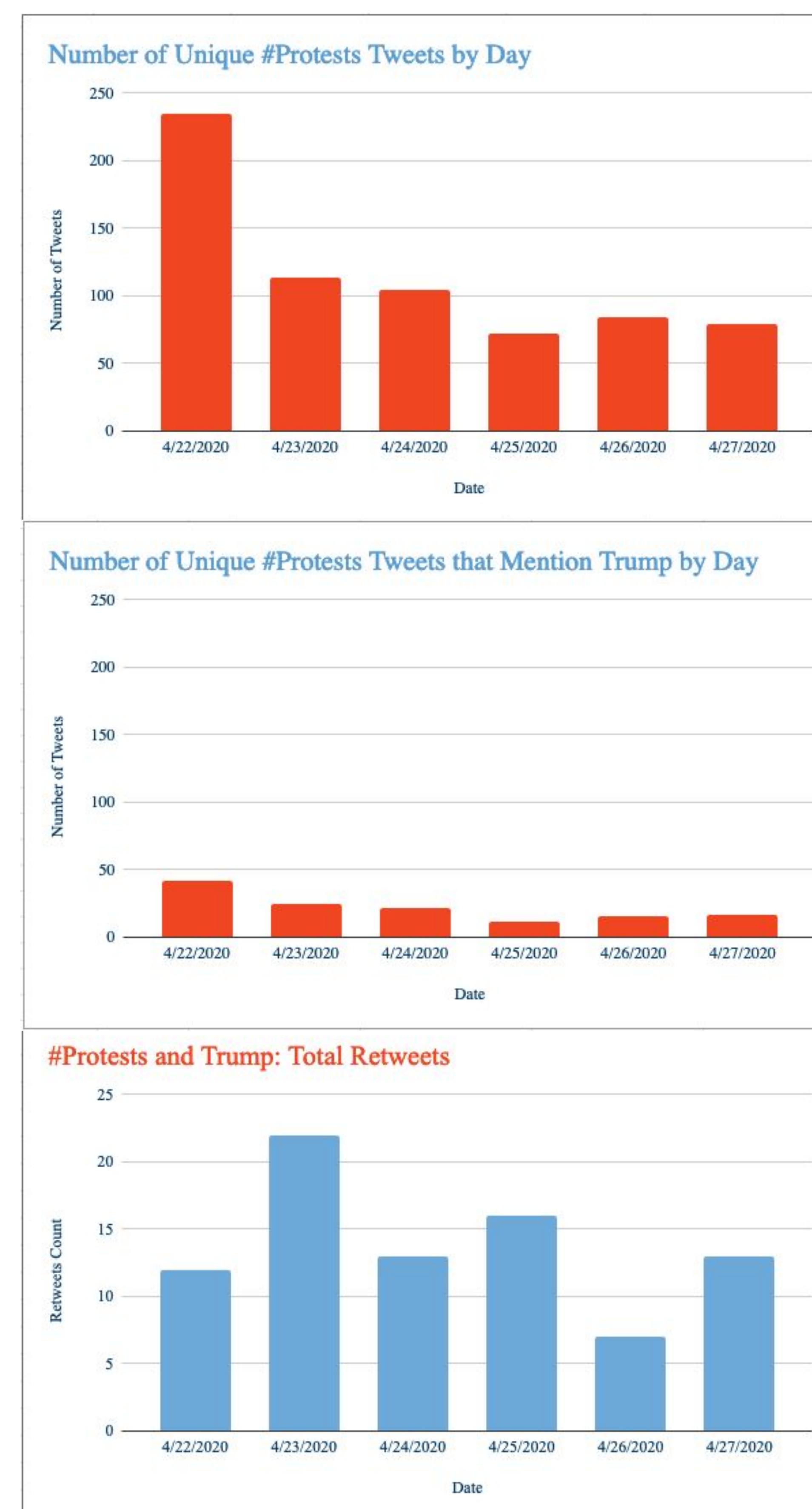
My main research questions are as follows:

- Looking at the tweets that reference the lockdown protests, how many of them also mention Trump? Does the frequency of such tweets change over time? What can the rates of retweets and likes tell us about the pervasiveness of these ideas?

I decided to use Twint for this project. Twint is a Twitter scraping tool written in Python that enables one to collect Twitter data without using Twitter's API. This code installed Twint on my device and then proceeded to compile a list of unique tweets containing the hashtag "protests" between April 22nd, 2020 and April 27th, 2020 (inclusively), the date on which I collected these tweets. April 22nd marked one week since the first major protest in Michigan, called Operation Gridlock. During this week, the American public certainly became aware of the lockdown protests, and Trump started making comments defending these protests. After acquiring a list of tweets that fulfilled the parameters, I used the search and replace function of Microsoft Excel to identify which of those tweets also contained at least one of these words: "donald" "trump" "president" "45". This search was case insensitive. At the end of this process, I had lists of the tweets themselves, their accompanying hashtags, the users who tweeted them, the date and time they were put online, the number of likes and retweets they received (at the time of collection), and other, less relevant, data.

Results

Twint collected a total of 688 tweets that contained “#protests” in the text. Among these tweets was a small number of references (approximately 10) to protests separate from the American lockdown protests, such as the protests in Hong Kong. These unrelated tweets were very minimal, so they should not invalidate the usefulness of the data set. 134 tweets from the overall total of 688 also mentioned Trump in some capacity (with a couple exceptions, such as a comment on the president of a different country).



Conclusion

With nearly 20% of collected #protests tweets containing references to Donald Trump, it is reasonable to conclude that a substantial portion of the public does in fact link the president's Covid-19 response to the prevalence of the lockdown protests. On the side that opposes these protests, people place blame on Trump for encouraging protesters and claim that he has not properly responded to the pandemic. On the side that supports these protests, people often cite Trump's reassurances that the pandemic is under control and assert that continued quarantine hurts Americans more than the virus, echoing Trump's comments that the cure cannot be worse than the sickness. Still, approximately 80% of the relevant tweets do not mention Trump in relation to the protests, so it is fair to say that a majority of Twitter users do not make that connection when unprompted. Perhaps if a poll were taken, many of those people would make that connection if asked about it.

The subset of Trump tweets changed proportionally with the overall number of #Protests tweets, so the general trend suggests a decrease in the number of tweets about the lockdown protests as well as a decrease in the number of those tweets that explicitly mention Trump. This could be due to the fact that news circulates through Twitter quickly and then loses relevance to Twitter users. Topics come and go at a rapid pace.

The number of #Protests retweets containing references to Trump could suggest that a larger portion of the population makes this connection (more than 20%). The retweets also vary more day by day when compared to the total #Protests tweets; the retweets do not follow the trend of steady decline. Ranging from 7 to 22 a day, the total number of these daily retweets are not especially significant, since retweets from the complete #Protests list likely balance out. Still, the retweets represent the spread of the idea that Trump is related to the increase of lockdown protests. This complete data set confirms that a substantial percentage of the population perceives a connection, whether positive or negative, between the president of the United States and lockdown protests against state governments. As the nation heads toward elections, this perception could play a key role in swaying voters in either direction.

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